



P.O. Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632
Phone 520.558.1146/558.7781 Toll free 800.426.7781 Fax 650.471.7667
Email naturalistjourneys@gmail.com info@caligo.com

FLORIDA Birding and Nature Tour With Naturalist Journeys April 18 – 29, 2015 TRIP REPORT

With Greg Smith, guide, and six participants: Linda, Mary, Wynn and Ken, Lynn and Gary.

Saturday, April 18 Arrivals

We all met at the Fort Lauderdale Airport and headed north to our first night's lodging in Juno Beach. After a very nice fish dinner we were ready for a good night's rest.

Sunday, April 19 Jonathon Dickinson State Park / Riverbend County Park / Middle Florida

Jonathon Dickinson State Park had a bad fire last year and it left a good deal of the park in bad shape. The primary trail near the railroad tracks was gone, or at least the vegetation was; we needed to find a different location. That was how we discovered the County's Riverbend Park.

We walked a couple of the trails in the park that wandered along sloughs associated with the Loxahatchee River. Screaming Red-shouldered Hawks greeted us, as did a Limpkin that took its foraging along the shore. A pair of Wood Ducks landed in the top of a likely looking nesting tree and gave us great looks. Red-bellied Woodpecker were common, along with American Redstart and Osprey. We finished the hike as we received some information on birds from a local Audubon group.

After a great Mexican lunch, we headed to some back roads for our drive across the state. Our first location was a bit



further west where we looked for, and then found, an adult male Snail Kite — stunning! On to more roads and more birds; the resident race of Sandhill Crane were scattered along the route and usually close to the road. We also spotted a pair of Crested Caracara who shared a raccoon with a large group of Black Vultures. American Swallow-tailed Kite put in a few appearances, but given that this is one of the most stunning flyers on Florida's list of birds, it just wasn't enough!

Monday, April 20 Babcock Webb / Casperson Beach / Venice Rookery

Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area is home to birds and other wildlife of the slash pine forest. Here we spent time looking for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, as did two other tour groups of birders. Their potential nesting trees were marked with a white band of paint, while active nests were signified by a piece of bright pink plastic tape. We did find two of the marked trees, but no birds.



We then followed the researcher around as she used a small camera and light that were on top of a telescoping pole. She would extend this tool up into the tree and insert it into the nesting cavity for a good look at what was going on inside. Apparently nothing was going on because she lowered the pole and removed the tape from the tree, signifying that the birds had fledged and left the area. That was probably the primary reason none of the groups could find the woodpecker.

We also looked for the elusive Bachman's Sparrow, but were only graced with a song. In the end, we never could find a visible individual, even with a return trip near the end of the day.

There were numerous Eastern Bluebirds and Eastern Meadowlarks perched and singing on territory and we heard, but didn't see, Northern Bobwhite. We did, however, see a group of month-old American Alligators in a roadside waterway. They were not the least bit interested in us, but the local Green Heron kept a watchful eye.

After lunch at Sharky's we headed over to Casperson Beach to look for the Florida Scrub Jay. As we stepped out of the car we were greeted by a Fish Crow that was busy calling. A dead palm tree was given a light scratch to see if any birds would pop out to check on the noise. We were in luck! From top to bottom we saw a



red morph Eastern Screech Owl, a European Starling and a Red-bellied Woodpecker. Not bad for one tree!

We walked over to the channel that allows boat access from the harbor to the Gulf and into a patch of scrub where we promptly found a clunky gopher tortoise. We watched her for a time, then turned our attention to the jays; two promptly came to the top of some snags and gave us great looks. Not a bad jaunt.

Our final stop of the day (not including our journey back to Babcock-Webb) was the Venice Rookery.

Tuesday, April 21 Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge / Cape Coral



As we headed out the Sanibel Causeway, we stopped on some of the man-made islets to see what shorebirds were foraging along the beaches. As we worked the water's edge, we found small groups of Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone and Willet. There was also a lone Least Sandpiper mixed in with a group of Sanderlings. A pleasant collection, but there were two other highlights associated with this site. The first was a single bottlenose dolphin that busily foraged about twenty meters offshore, chasing its prey around a small

channel marker. The second was an adult Reddish Egret that performed its feeding dance. The busy egret's abrupt movements around the water in an attempt to startle fish in its direction only brought it closer and closer to us!

After a quick stop at the Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center, we headed out to drive the auto tour route. The tide had just started to come back in, which made for the best conditions to push the birds towards us. Numerous stops provided great looks at Roseate Spoonbill, American White Pelican and Yellow-crowned Night Heron, as well as numerous species of shorebirds and other herons and egrets. This really was a wonderful spectacle!

After a very tasty lunch, we headed to Cape Coral to look for Burrowing Owl. The local community takes great pride in its healthy population of these diurnal insect-reduction monitors. If a pair takes up residence on one of the many vacant lots, folks put up two perches and a small symbolic fence around the burrow. Weed management means mowing to keep vegetation within bounds,



but this only enhances the owl's foraging since it removes the obstacles that would inhibit their ability to find prey.

As we soon found out, the birds, residents and birders all benefit from the locals' hospitality. On a large group of contiguous vacant lots we had four different pairs of owls, with our closest pair only twenty-five feet away! And all of these pairs nonchalantly took in the scenery as the lots were being mowed. What a great way to finish the day.

Wednesday, April 22 Corkscrew Swamp / Fakahatchee / Everglades City / Shark Valley

We headed over to the other side of the state, but along the way had opportunities to bird some really wonderful places, all world-renowned! First was Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary near Immokalee.



This 2.4-mile elevated boardwalk plays host to the largest remaining old-growth bald cypress stand in the state. When water conditions are appropriate, it also hosts a nesting colony of Wood Storks, but not this year. However, that didn't mean we wouldn't see this species. As we walked we were able to find Pileated Woodpecker, Carolina Wren and Northern Parula that fed in the Tillandsia-festooned cypresses. When we came to the first pond, the local alligator watched as a Wood Stork, Great Egret and Little Blue Heron all took turns to feast on numerous stranded

fish — fish in a bowl so-to-speak.

The next pond was just amazing, as we found out while we walked to its edge. As we arrived, an adult Barred Owl flew in and landed on the boardwalk railing ten feet in front of us! It was not the least bit fazed by us, the other visitors or the docents who busily looked and took pictures. Then we were treated to the other adult who landed on the backside of the pond and started to hunt. While all of this was going on, we heard a disturbance on the right side of the pond and saw two juveniles fly down to the forest floor in an attempt to catch their own prey. We had four owls in view and none seemed to be the least bit plussed at everyone's presence.

While all this was going on, there were numerous waders feeding on fish that were left in this continually shrinking pond. It was really



an eclectic group of wildlife and plants in such a small piece of swamp. But we had more to see as we headed across to the other coast.

A drive with stops along the Fakahatchee Strand gave us great comparative looks at both species of vultures. Numerous waders foraged on the south side of Route 41, the Everglades National Park side. The north side was all cattails with islands of Sabal palms. The cattails looked very dead, as if a saltwater surge had inundated the area. We dropped down into Everglades City for another very tasty lunch at local restaurant, Camellia, on the water. Killer fish tacos sent us on our way to Shark Valley and the tram ride.

The Everglades were dry for the most part, which only concentrated the wildlife in the pool behind the tower and along the edge of the western road. It was here that we saw Purple Gallinule, numerous alligators and Anhinga. The ride gave us the opportunity to see how the valley functioned and how wildlife adapted to the changing water levels. It also gave us a bit of a reprieve from the heat and humidity that was prevalent today.

Thursday, April 23 Anhinga Trail / Flamingo



It was a sticky day, but we were ready for birding the 'Glades and a trip down to Flamingo. We pulled into the parking lot where we were greeted by the persistent sign that warned of vulture damage to your vehicle. But this time there were no vultures! We started down Anhinga Trail with male alligators bellowing their dominance call. But other than that growl, only frogs called. The birds were eerily quiet, but then a White-eyed Vireo started up, followed by Green Herons and finally a few Anhinga. However, those really were the only birds around, still no vultures. The water played a placid surface so any 'gator movement echoed across the pond.

We looked for Least Bittern, wader nests and other passerines. It was very quiet, so we decided to head deeper into the sea of grass. We were rewarded at Paroutis Pond, which had nesting storks and spoonbills, along with other long-legged water birds.

There were scattered pools of water throughout the drive, but no large concentrations of birds close to the road. However, we did get to see most of the colonial nesters somewhere along the road. When we arrived at Flamingo we had time to find numerous nesting Osprey, an American Crocodile and Gray Kingbird, who was a recent arrival.

We took the boat out into Florida Bay where the tropical breeze cooled us down as we moved by flocks of terns, gulls and shorebirds. This certainly was a great way to bird this part of Florida.

Friday, April 24 Dagny State Park / Anhinga Trail / Long Pine Key



We started today at Dagny State Park, which is a tropical hardwood forest right on the edge of the ocean.

If there were migrants, this would be the first piece of land available after flying over the Caribbean. There was a small assortment of warblers along with some singing Black-whiskered Vireos. But the highlight was the very cooperative Mangrove Cuckoo that allowed about five minutes of viewing — a nice start!

We headed over to Anhinga Trail in Everglades to see if morning had anything

unusual. We saw lots of alligators, Green Herons and just a few Anhinga, but that was all we could find. The water level was very low and this might have been the primary reason for so few birds.

Next we visited Long Pine Key where there were numerous Eastern Towhees, a Downy Woodpecker and one Brown-headed Nuthatch. A pair of Eastern Bluebirds put in an appearance, as did the ever-present Red-bellied Woodpecker. But time to move on to Mahogany Hammock.

The short boardwalk at Mahogany was a little quiet, but that was not a surprise given the 90+ degrees and 80%+ humidity. It took a while, but we did find a pair of White-eyed Vireos calling. We then had a Black and White Warbler, but that was all we could find, so we headed back to the hotel to let the day cool off.

Saturday, April 25 Transition Day / Driving the Keys / Windley Key State Park



Today we headed back to Fort Lauderdale where two of our group had to head for home. We added two more who were joining us for our trip down the Keys.

After lunch, we stopped at Windley Key State Park and found a few birds making the rounds. White-crowned Pigeons flew in and out of the trees and a small group of Palm Warblers searched the ground, while a Common Yellowthroat searched overhead. Northern Parula, a Tennessee Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warblers also put in an

appearance. Not a bad stop, but we had to finish our drive down the Keys.

Sunday, April 26 Dry Tortugas Birding / Fort Jefferson

Today was the day we got out to the Dry Tortugas and Fort Jefferson. Up early, we made the forty-minute drive to the new Key West Ferry Terminal and the Yankee Freedom III. We had a short wait and then boarded the catamaran for the 2.5-hour ride out to these keys.

There were a few Laughing Gulls on the ride out, but the only other flying animal we saw were fish, and they seemed to be abundant! We motored past Hospital Key where we got to view nesting Masked Booby, and then we tied up at the Fort Jefferson dock. On the old pier pilings were numerous Brown Noddies, one of the common terns out here.

On land we started at the “campground” where we got to see Chuck-Will’s Widow, Kentucky Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Wood Thrush and more. Campers busily moved in, but were very generous in sharing their sites as we combed through the warblers and thrushes. Worm-eating Warbler, Swainson’s Thrush and Indigo Buntings were also in the scattered trees.

We made our way into the Fort where we spent three hours birding the parade grounds and the scattered trees. Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, Bay-breasted Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo and more neo-tropic migrants were abundant. Although there were not as many birds as in year’s past, we saw great diversity, especially given the Merlin and Peregrine Falcons patrolling the skies.

What an exciting day in a very remote piece of American history.



Monday, April 27 Birding the Florida Keys

Today we made our way up the Keys towards Key Largo. We started the day birding part of the Key West Deer National Wildlife Reserve out on No Name Key. Small flocks of migrants worked the trees along the road, with Black-whiskered Vireo as one of the more common songsters. Black-throated Green-Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, the ubiquitous Palm Warbler and Chest-nut sided Warbler all made an appearance. A nice start to the day!

Next stop was Bahia Honda State Park. Maybe it was the weather, but today the park was full of folks snorkeling and working on tans. It was really a challenge to find habitat that was not impacted



by visitors. We did find one sandbar exposed by low tide that played host to White-rumped Sandpiper, Dunlin and other shorebird species. There were numerous egrets foraging along with loafing gulls and Royal Terns.

We stopped at smaller keys, but the extremely hot temperatures seemed to put a lid on bird activity. We checked into our hotel and took an afternoon break before we headed out to Dagny State Park for a look around. There were a couple of small groups of warblers, including Northern Parula, Yellow-rumped and Blackpoll. The temperature had finally cooled down a bit and allowed us far more comfortable birding.

Tuesday, April 28 The Keys and Everglades

We had one more day and decided to visit Dagny State Park one last time and then head into the Everglades, hoping to find Short-tailed Hawk, Snail Kite and manatee. Those birds we saw the night before must have left that evening with the knowledge that a tropical storm was headed their way. Dagny was devoid of birds, so we headed north to the Everglades.

Royal Palm and the Anhinga Trail were very different from our prior stop. The water level was at least 15" higher and the alligators were actually starting to disperse. Green Heron were still common and there seemed to be more Anhinga around. Our best look was at an adult Red-shouldered Hawk that flew in and preened fifteen feet over the trail. He was definitely acclimated to people.

Stops at Pa-hay-okee, Mahogany Hammock, Paroutis Pond and Mrazek Pond gave us looks at a Red-shouldered Hawk devouring a snake and a pair of White-eyed Vireo that performed a call and response for us. We also had great views of nesting and flying Roseate Spoonbills, as well as a Solitary Sandpiper.



Next stop was Flamingo, and as we drove up to the marina there was a grazing manatee at the dock. So in the water four feet from us was an adult pulling algae from the dock. You can't get much closer.

On the VC lawn were a large flock of cowbirds, two of which were the accidental Shiny Cowbird. Further on at Eco Pond there was a crashed drone mixed in with a flock of Black-necked Stilts. American Swallow-tailed Kites were conducting aerial acrobats as they picked large grasshoppers off of

branches without landing. What spectacular birds with an incredibly active hunting method.

That was it for the day, so we headed back to our hotel for our farewell dinner. While at dinner, more tropical lightning and rain pummeled the bay and the restaurant, which served as a dramatic backdrop to our last meal together.

Wednesday, April 29 Departures

We had enough time to take Highway 27 north to Fort Lauderdale so we could look for Snail Kite one more time. We had no luck, but did find Purple Swamphen (newly accepted now on the ABA list), Monk Parakeet and more kites. What an unexpected and delightful finish to our trip down the Keys.

Trip Report and all photos by Greg Smith www.flickr.com/photos/slobirdr/

